A CUBIST READING OF MAURICE RAVEL'S LA VALSE

By

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Abstract

Ravel's *La valse* is often interpreted as the embodiment of fallen or disintegrating romantic idioms, embodied in his treatment of the waltz. However, *La valse* can also be discussed in the context of the artistic trends of its time, particularly its relationship to cubist aesthetics in painting. Although there is no concrete evidence that cubism was used as a source for *La valse,* Deborah Mawer has written about the influence of cubist ideas on other works by Ravel. My analysis will correlate certain cubist techniques with Ravel's compositional techniques and explain how to translate cubism into a musical aesthetic consisting of characteristics such as fragmentation, angularity, and collage, similar to the analytical cubist works of Picasso and Braque. Comparisons with paintings by Picasso and Braque, along with Ravel's earlier *Valses nobles et sentimentales,* replace the analytical focus on the destruction of the waltz idiom with a depiction of the many layers, angles and facets of the waltz, as if it were the subject of a cubist painting. This cubist interpretation emphasizes the structure and form of the piece, as well as emphasizing the thematic relationships. Rather than giving primacy to a climactic arrival in the final bars of the piece, this reading focuses the performer's attention on the development of the main body of the piece.

Acknowledgements

I would like to extend my great appreciation to my advisor, Dr. Jack Winerock, who has also served as my piano professor at the University of Kansas. Throughout my years at KU, he has offered me much insight into the art of piano performance and the experiences and opportunities he has given me are an invaluable asset as I continue to perform. I am also grateful for Dr. James Michael Kirkendoll for imbuing in me, a more intense and meaningful interest toward new music. I want to express my utmost gratitude toward Dr. Colin Roust who has provided assistance and crucial advice to keep this project running in the right direction and giving constructive advice on writing this topic. Finally, I want to acknowledge my family and their unwavering support.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

Completed in 1919, *La valse* was conceptualized over an extended period of time. Maurice Ravel originally composed *La valse* as an orchestral work in 1906 and 1907, paying homage to the Viennese "King of the Waltz," Johann Strauss, Jr. What was initially to be titled *Wien* (Vienna), became a "choreographic poem" named *La valse* when it was ultimately finished in 1919 as a commission from ballet impresario Sergei Diaghilev. In 1920, Ravel also made a piano transcription of the piece, the version that I will be analyzing. Diaghilev ultimately rejected *La valse* as unsuitable for a ballet, declaring that it was "not a ballet but a portrait or painting of ballet."[1] In the preface to the score of *La valse*, Ravel offers the following scenario:

> Through breaks in the swirling crowds, waltzing couples may be glimpsed. Little by little they disperse: one makes out an immense hall filled with a whirling crowd. The stage is illuminated gradually. The light of the chandeliers peaks at the fortissimo. An Imperial Court, about 1855.[2]

The era from 1855 to the turn of the twentieth century was a period of social glitter for Vienna, a center of absolute political and social power as well as a city of provocative women's fashions and frivolous music.[3] In France, the arts also flourished, with impressionism being the dominant musical and artistic aesthetic of the era. However, in *fin-de-siècle* France, many political and social institutions were unraveling. In 1914, World War I crippled the economy of Italy, France, and other countries. Although not all of Europe was debilitated, Paris and Vienna, the leading centers of the arts, were impacted as the arts were given a different level of

[1] Deborah Mawer, *The Cambridge Companion to Ravel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2000), 152.
[2] Maurice Ravel, *La valse* (Paris: Durand & Cie. 1921), Preface.
[3] H.H. Stuckenschmidt, *Maurice Ravel: Variations on His Life and Works* (Philadelphia: Chilton Book Company, 1968), 188.

importance. Composers consequently changed their mindset toward music and their musical language reflected the avant-garde spirit colored by social, political, and artistic forces.

One of the prominent aesthetics in the Parisian art world from 1907 to 1921 was cubism. It appears that Ravel found inspiration and a model in this artistic movement while working on *La valse*. In placing *La valse* into the aesthetic context of its time. I will correlate certain cubist techniques with Ravel's compositional techniques and explain how to translate cubism into a musical aesthetic consisting of characteristics such as fragmentation, angularity, and collage and other cubist techniques. Because of the parallels between Ravel's compositional techniques in *La valse* and the contemporary cubist techniques of painting, I will also propose that applying these artistic principles musically is the most ideal way of portraying the piece.

Currents Before World War I

The years before World War I saw rapid growth in entertainment (music-halls, cinemas, and theatres), new forms of mass transportation, and urbanization. However, underneath the vibrant energy of the dynamic Parisian society, there were conflicts and contradictions resulting in extreme social inequalities, the rise of vociferous feminist movements, and international competition for colonial possessions. The reputation of the city attracted a diverse community of the artistic avant-garde and so the city became one of the key centers for the development of modernism in all the arts. Artists invented new and unprecedented ways to express what they felt during the chaotic and tragic stages before, during, and after the war. These new approaches provided them with the means to expose different perspectives of the context in which they lived. In their art, they seemed to capture the fragmented order in society, the abrupt changes in lifestyles to which people had to adjust, and contrasting events that overlapped each other. Cubist

techniques provided one language for the arts to mirror what was happening in those modern times.

The name of the movement originated in France as a catchword by means of a reference to the word "cube" by Henri Matisse. Later the French art critic Louis Vauxcelles coined the term "cubism" after seeing the landscapes that Braque painted in 1908 at L'Estaque.[4] In *Picasso and the Invention of Cubism*, Pepe Karmel presents several theories of cubism to explain what Picasso and his contemporaries were doing. Although Daniel Kahnweiler declared that there simply was no theory, it was hard to deny that the creation of this formal language was a transmutation of earlier ideas in impressionism and postimpressionism; a transformation that was based on the perspective of realism and portrayals of it.[5]

Cubism evolved through two key phases: analytical and synthetic cubism. Analytical cubism focused on aspects of light, space and structure, while synthetic cubism utilized synthetic subjects and signs in the canvas. I will be focusing more on the characteristics and techniques of analytical cubism, as found in various works by Pablo Picasso and Georges Braque, who were two early proponents of the cubist movement. They translated emotions and expressions of everyday life into their paintings by use of artistic devices such as geometric structuring or angularity, fragmentation or superimposing of defined shapes in abstract manner, and collage, the art of implanting foreign material onto a subject. Paintings such as Braque's *Violin and Palette* (1910-1911) and *The Fruitdish and Glass* (1912), and Picasso's *Still Life on a Piano* (1911) and *The Girl With the Mandolin* (1910) will be referenced in my analysis section.

[4] Sabine Rewald, "Cubism," In *Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History.* New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2000 http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/cube/hd_cube.htm (May 2017).
[5] Pepe Karmel, *Picasso and the Invention of Cubism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), 10.

The Aesthetics of Cubism

The first cubist painting by Picasso, *Les demoiselles d'Avignon* (1907) was completed in the same year as the original version of *La valse.* This composition is important as a landmark in the beginning of the cubist movement with its discordant proportions and dislocated forms that encompass the violent and jagged nature of this new artistic expression. In a similar way, Braque had helped initiate the first steps of cubism when he introduced a similar style of perspective by maintaining a sense of balance and harmony through manipulating textures, light, and the rhythm of lines and geometric planes. In analytical cubist artworks, objects are broken up and then reassembled in an abstracted form. I will analyze the compositional elements of *La valse* from the perspective of the cubist methods of painting, such as angularity, fragmentation, and collage. My musical analysis will concentrate on elements of form, thematic material, harmony, meter, rhythm, accentuation, tempo, dynamics, tone color, and texture.

While Ravel may have consciously adopted a cubist aesthetic while composing *La valse*, he was also inspired by Stephane Mallarmé, an influential poet in the symbolist movement. Ravel was part of a group named *Les Apaches*, an assembly of painters, musicians, critics, mathematicians, and other scholars.[6] In their meetings, they discussed paintings, declaimed poetry, and performed new music and it was here that Ravel cultivated his taste of the arts under the influence of Mallarmé's poetry.[7] He even composed a piece in honor of the poet by setting several of his poems to music.[8]

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[6] The interaction of artists representing the various art disciplines should not be surprising at all since in the previous period, Impressionism, a synergy between techniques used in painting and in musical composition had been common fare, such as Debussy's associations with picturesque depictions of nature or water, e.g. his compositions *Reflets dans l'eau* [Reflections in the Water]. In Camille Mauclair's 1902 essay of "Musical Painting the Fusion of the Arts," he wrote that in comparing Monet's landscapes and Debussy's sounds, harmony, value, theme and motif are employed equally by musicians and painters.

[7] Arbie Orenstein, *Ravel: Man and Musician* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1975), 29.

[8] Maurice Ravel, *Trois poèmes de Stéphane Mallarmé* (Paris : Durand, 1914).

Stéphane Mallarmé's aesthetic played a large part in the development of the cubist movement and theories. He recommended "to paint not the thing itself, but the effect it produces."[9] As Picasso himself was looking for new ways in art, some of his artistic techniques originated in Mallarmé's concept of introducing visual stimuli into the form of the poem. Mallarmé achieved this, for instance, by coloring words or by using the rhythm of the poem, as if "it were a piece of music."[10] This fusion of the arts that was idealized by Mallarmé may also be observed in the synthesis of music and visual art seen in *La valse's* compositional characteristics.

Ravel's *Valses nobles et sentimentales* (1911)

While Ravel composed the orchestral version of *La valse*, he also composed the *Valses nobles et sentimentales*. The set consists of seven waltzes and an epilogue that was later adapted into a ballet *Adelaide ou le langage des fleurs* (Adelaide, or the language of flowers). The *Noble and Sentimental Waltzes* share the same title as Franz Schubert's own *Noble and Sentimental Waltzes* (1823 and 1827). Although there are no direct quotations, there are similarities in form (binary structure), harmonic progressions (tonic-dominant harmonic polarity and sudden unconventional modulations), and phrase lengths (even-number bars). Ravel assigns a certain temperament for each waltz, *Assez lent—avec une expression intense* or *Presque lent—dans un sentiment intime*, which suggest that though the *Noble and Sentimental Waltzes* are sectional (like *La valse)*, each waltz is distinct by itself like a character piece in a suite. Although *La valse* is seemingly compartmentalized into various waltzes as well, there are no expressive titles and the lyrical melodies (heard prominently in character pieces) are broken up into fragments or even

[9] Christopher Gray, *Cubist Aesthetic Theories* (Baltimore: The John Hopkins Press, 1953), 18.
[10] Ibid., 16.

disrupted by accents or rests, giving them a disjunct nature that might momentarily seem out of context.

Despite these waltzes having a distinct Viennese rhythm and a music profile evoking nineteenth-century romanticism, Ravel still incorporated a modern vocabulary (bi-tonality, augmented triads, parallel seventh chords, etc) into the composition. The musical language remains aware of tonal centers and thus these waltzes represent a more concentrated harmonic language with less emphasis on virtuosic display, a characteristic frequently seen in the brilliant *glissandi* passages of *La valse*.

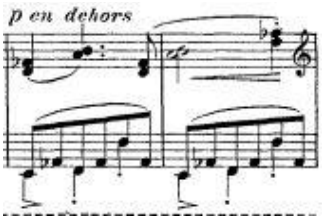
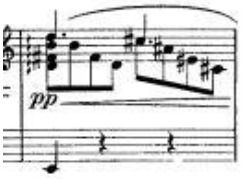
Chapter 2

Analytical Techniques

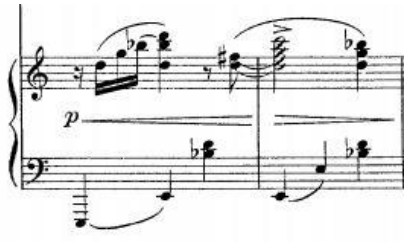
My analysis of Ravel's *La valse* will focus on the various waltz themes featured in the work and the stages of their evolution throughout the composition. In addition to analyzing the thematic material, I will also cover other musical elements—such as form, harmony, meter, rhythm, accentuation, tempo, dynamics, tone color, and texture—and draw parallels between them and contemporary techniques characteristic of cubism.

Table 1 introduces the various waltz melodies that are present in the piece. The waltz is organized into two main sections. The waltz motifs are all found in the first section (A) of *La valse*, starting from measure 1. Many of the waltz motifs of section A recur in the second section (B), in which the reprisal starts from measure 440. However, in section B, the recurring waltz themes are transformed or distorted even more by the composer to accommodate a more frenzied and agitated style. Musical examples in the text will illustrate how the composer deviates from the serene or frivolous nature of the waltz, to expose a fragmented and explosive façade of it.

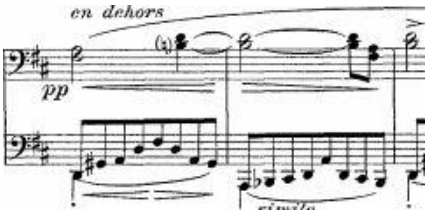
Table 1: Waltz motives in Ravel, *La valse*.

Waltz A mm. 12–43	
Waltz A.2 mm. 44–49	

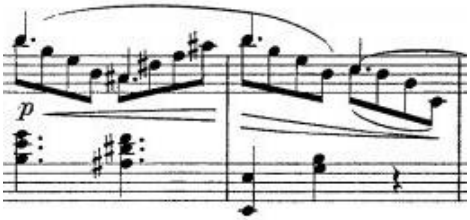
Waltz A.3
mm. 50–65



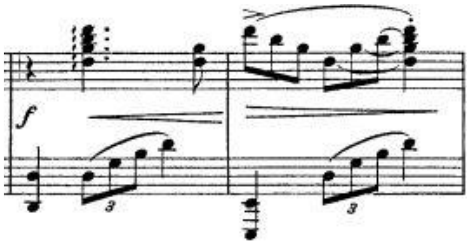
Waltz B
mm. 69–98



Waltz A.21
mm. 106–129

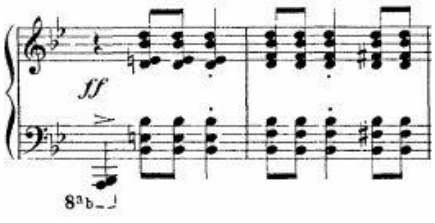


Waltz C
mm. 130–146

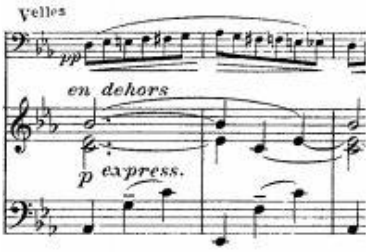


Waltz D
mm. 147–210

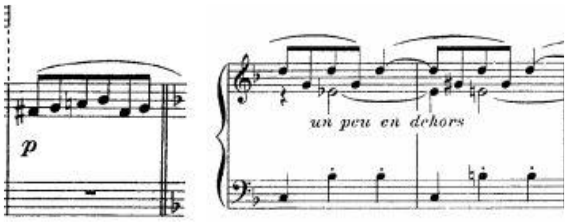
Waltz E
mm. 211–242



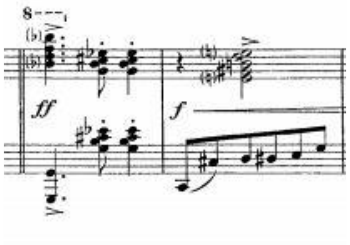
Waltz F
mm. 243–274



Waltz G
mm. 275–290

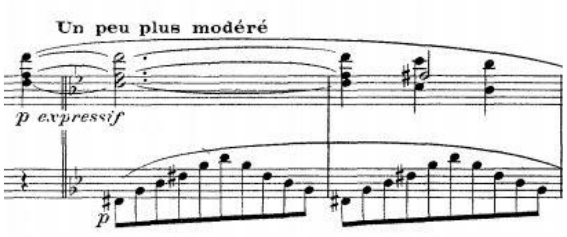


Waltz H
mm. 291–330

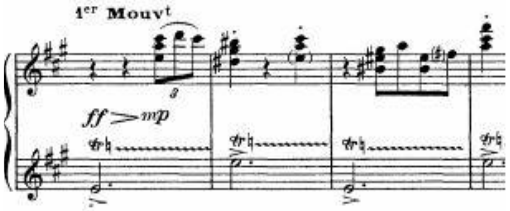


Waltz I
mm. 331–370

Waltz I.2
mm. 371–402



Waltz J
mm. 403–440



The most common characteristics of the waltz genre are symmetrical phrase structuring, a strong emphasis on the downbeat, quick triple meter, recurring thematic material, and functional

tonality with simple harmonies changing only once per measure. The circularity or the continuing rhythmical energy of the dance is supported by the "um-pah-pah" rhythm of the bass causing the dancer or performer to feel only one beat per measure at faster tempos.

In Ravel's *La valse*, there are elements that diverge from the regular waltz pattern. As I examine these patterns, it appears that there are parallels with various cubist techniques and principle. Based on the number of occurrences, I have selected three main elements: angularity, fragmentation, and collage. These distort the narrative elements, juxtapose distinct planes or shapes, and generate disorientation from the overlapping of different textures. In applying such techniques to *La valse*, Ravel was able to manipulate the form and musical characteristics of the original Viennese waltz, and transmute it by embodying in them aesthetics that reflected the artistic trends of his time. In the following sections, I will examine how these three artistic principles shaped the transformation of the waltz themes in *La valse*. In each section, I will also feature a short introduction to the particular cubist technique under study.

Angularity

As previously stated, cubism had two distinct phases. The earlier phase, which lasted until about 1912, was called analytical cubism. In this period, the artist analyzed the subject from many different viewpoints and reconstructed it within a monochromatic and geometric framework, because the overall effect was to create an image that evoked only a sense of the form of the subject. These fragmented images were unified by the use of a subdued and limited palette of colors. In the second phase, synthetic cubism, the artist used a more colorful, expressive, and textured style. Early analytical cubist painters strived to showcase the geometric natures of their subjects and thus the pictorial structures displayed an angularity in their art to

produce different perspectives. In exhibiting those aspects, form was most clearly characterized, and best revealed, by the subject's fundamental structure.[11] Angularity not only presented, but also gave emphasis and importance to the characteristics of the multiple views of the subject. Visual segments of the front, back, top, bottom, and sides of an object jumped out and assaulted the viewer's eye simultaneously. This approach resulted in less dependence on color or surface aesthetics and more focus on the configuration of the subject through planes that were fragmented into angular facets and developed with strong geometric features.[12]

In examining Ravel's composition, I argue that the composer incorporated elements of angularity into the waltz. The passage that begins in measure 288 (see figure 1) features large leaps from the last beat of the third measure going into the first beat of the following measure. Ravel places an emphasis on the first beat (adhering to the typical characteristics of the waltz), but adds an accent mark and *fortissimo* dynamic on the first beat of the second measure, introducing a strong percussive quality on the chord. This angularity, brought out through articulation, dynamics, and register changes, disrupts the charming yet detached quality of Waltz G. This sudden contrast is further enhanced by the immediate shift from Waltz G to Waltz H, as we realize this is the first abrupt segue from one waltz to another. Previous waltzes are linked by common tone, diminishing textures, or by a measure of *piano*-level dynamic in the new waltz theme before it unravels towards denser textures and a stronger dynamic level.

[11] Guy Habasque, *Cubism: Biographical and Critical Study* (Lausanne: Imprimeries Réunies, 1959), 52.

[12] In Braques' *Violin and Palette* (1909), the painting illustrates the emphasis of structure and angles by faceted forms, flattened spatial planes and by muted colors. Especially with the removal of color, one's eyes would gravitate to the structure of the content—the violin and the artist's palette. However what is so striking in this painting is its organization around strong diagonal axes which ultimately breaks the space and its lattice into triangles or diamonds. The curvy edges of the subject (violin) become jagged and the horizontal lines of the backdrop (sheets of music scores) disappear with more emphasis on the verticality.

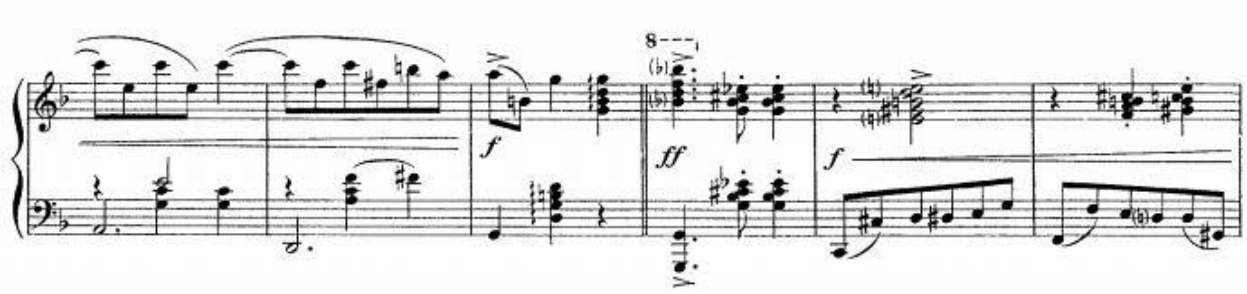


Figure 1: Ravel, *La valse*, mm. 288–293.

Other examples of the composer using large leaps are found in measures 217 through 221 (see figure 2), where Ravel uses an approximately three-octave interval between two chords. However, instead of placing the accent on the first beat, like in the previous example, the composer assigns it to the second beat and momentarily disrupts the "um-pah-pah" rhythm.

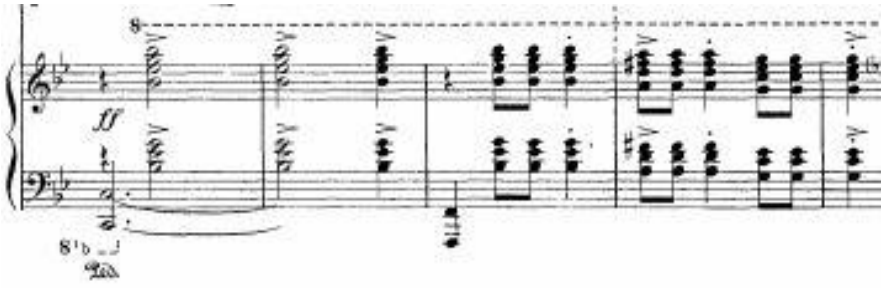


Figure 2: Ravel, *La valse*, mm. 217–221.

There are also examples in which Ravel changes the metric organization of the waltz by employing hemiolas, thus presenting a different perspective of mood and personality. For example, Waltz I.2 (see figure 3) conveys a picturesque feeling of a ballet dancer prancing, but by inserting a hemiola, the composer gives a new and distinct feel or sway to the ballet dancer's movements.

Figure 3: Ravel, *La valse*, mm. 384-385.

In the penultimate measure of the waltz, in section B, Ravel completely destroys the rhythmic characteristics of the waltz by dropping the triple meter for a free-meter effect. He achieves this by placing individual accents on all three beats (see figure 4).

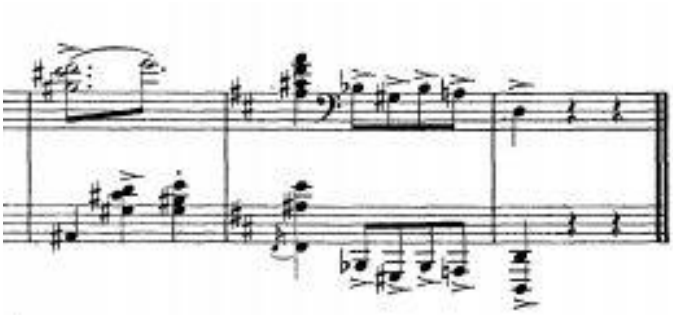


Figure 4: Ravel, *La valse*, mm. 754-755.

Ravel also uses dynamics to distort the linear narrative of the waltz and incorporate angularity within the piece. In measure 501 (see figure 5), the motif's four-measure phrase begins a crescendo starting at *forte*, but three measures further, the dynamics suddenly drop to *piano*, then builds to the last measure. As in the example shown above, Ravel does not place the

accent on the first beat, but on the second and the third beats, thus taking away the original and identifying element of the Viennese waltz.

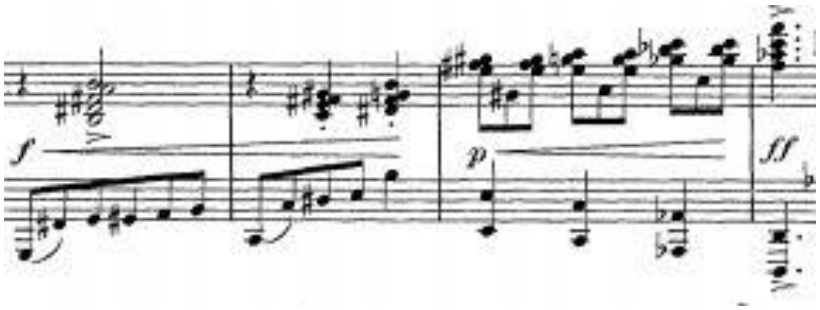


Figure 5: Ravel, *La valse*, mm. 501-504.

Further examples of angularity can be found in the later sections of the waltz (see figure 6), where more volume fluctuations cause sharp changes in the dynamics. The use of the spectrum between *piano* and *fortissimo* within the span of one measure, introduces fast and chaotic changes on the emotional level, as the performer has one measure between different waltz motifs to stabilize the mood, before the motif dives into *piano* again.

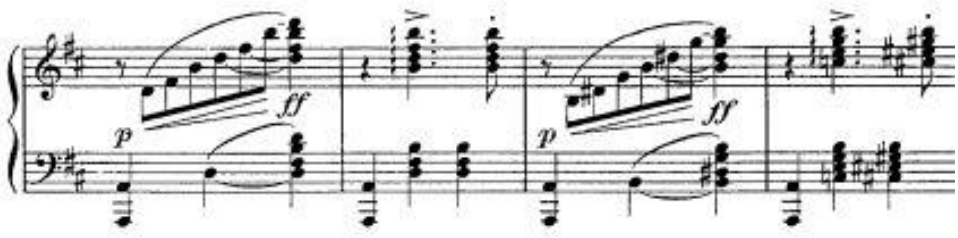


Figure 6: Ravel, *La valse*, mm. 704-707.

Angularity was an earlier characteristic of cubism that represented the artists' views of their subjects. This was developed into geometric restructuring of the subject, which led to a

dismembered presentation of elements of the painting, conveying new narratives and perspectives of the visual.

Fragmentation

Fragmentation is the geometric restructuring of an object in order to showcase it in many different dimensions and facets, though with the goal of emphasizing and presenting the form most clearly.[13] Objects or subjects that were fractured into visual fragments were rearranged so that the viewer would not be able to experience them linearly or sequentially in order to comprehend the picture. In analytical cubism, monochromaticism was used in conjunction with fragmentation. In Picasso's *Portrait of Daniel-Henry Kahnweiler* (1910), the color schemes consist of whitish-grays, browns, and dark browns. Within the fragmented facial and body characteristics of Picasso's friend, the artist directs people's eyes to the lighter portion of the painting (which is an impression of Kahnweiler's face) in contrast to the darker areas of the painting (the rest of the body).[14]

In analytical cubism, Picasso and Braque both used monochromaticism in their paintings with the purpose of diverting the observer's attention away from color and pre-formed ideas based on it, focusing instead on the form, lines, or shapes of the painting. To better achieve this, they avoided artistic additives such as vibrant contrasting colors and decorative details.

[13] Fragmentation explores the freedom of the artist to render his or her subject into simultaneously depicting it in many views, thus fragmenting the form. In Braque's *The Portuguese* (1911), the artist overcomes the unified singularity of the subject and transforms it into an object of visual understanding from different perspectives, because he wanted to express the entire person simultaneously. The only way to see the subject's front, sides, and back was to render all of its faces in a fractured way by fragmenting and integrating them.

[14] Daniel-Henry Kahnweiler was an art gallery dealer and a friend of Picasso who strongly advocated for the artist's style. He was a spokesman for cubism recognizing the importance and beauty of Picasso's *Les Demoiselles D'Avignon*. John Richardson, *A Life of Picasso, the Cubist Rebel (1907-1916)*, (New York: Knopf, 2007).

Additionally, this required the viewer to have a more active role in distinguishing it from its background through shapes, angles, and slight gradations of colors.[15]

La valse is a piece that uses a great deal of tonal color in many areas. However, there are some places at which Ravel employs monochromaticism.[16] For example, near the end of the piece (see figure 7), he introduces a luscious and rich texture characterized by big rolled chords in the right hand, dynamics that fluctuate rapidly from *piano* to *forte*, and accented octaves in the left hand, to assert the triple meter. But at measures 711 and 712 (the boxed measures in figure 7), a short waltz theme suddenly emerges. This two-measure theme has a totally different character than the waltz themes surrounding it. The section begins with rich, powerful *fortissimo* chords, but the contrasting short theme features a monophonic texture along with a lesser dynamic marking. Ravel writes on top of the theme: *Un peu moins vif* [a little less bright] and *Mouvement du début* [perform the same tempo as at the beginning]. By labeling it such, the character of this theme is perceived to have a monochromatic coloristic tone seen in its simplest and least-decorative form. Surrounding this short and distinctive waltz motif, Maurice Ravel paints other waltz motifs with decorative musical elements containing surges of tonal color, creating a sharp contrast between the two. When the composer reveals the structure simply by using a monophonic texture and homogeneous dynamic level, the listener suddenly perceives the form of the composition, a waltz.

[15] When discussing Picasso's work of 1909-1910, Daniel Kahnweiler cited John Locke arguing that Picasso's goal was to present the "primary" qualities of the subject—form and its position in space without recourse to "secondary" qualities such as light and color. Pepe Karmel, *Picasso and The Invention of Cubism,* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), 12.

[16] Monochromaticism, translated into musical terms, defines the use of less tonal color or dynamic fluctuations, and unembellished texture of the notes.

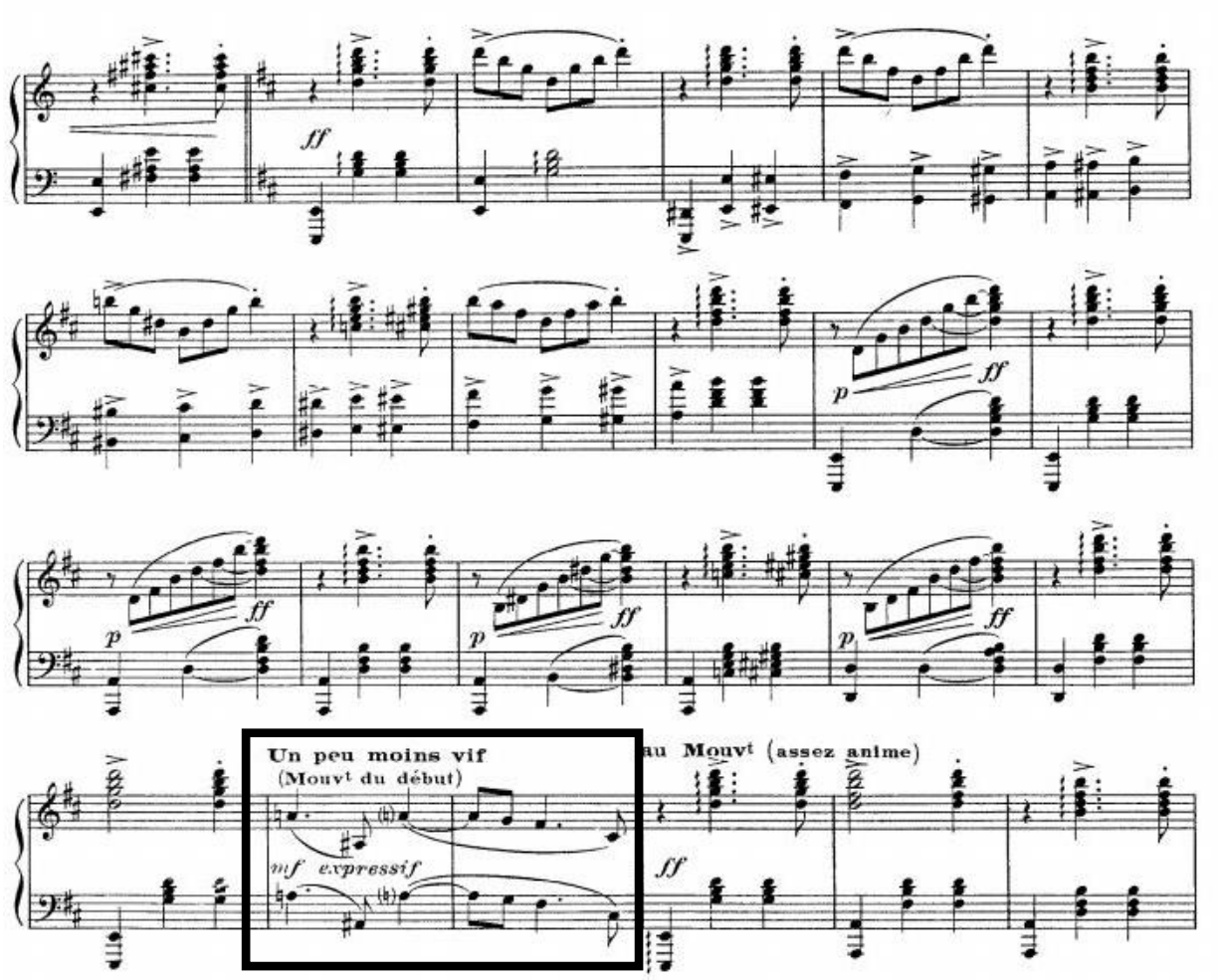


Figure 7: Ravel, *La valse*, mm. 692-715.

Another example of monochromaticism can be observed a few pages earlier in measures 579 to 600. Since *La valse* is transcribed from an orchestral work, the primary melodies, textural changes, and dynamics are portrayed pianistically. Because of the singular nature of the piano as well as the soloistic aspect of the pianist, I believe there are many nuances and coloristic elements that are depicted by different instruments and that are lost in the transcription. However, this is remediated somewhat by the use of an additional staff above the piano staves to

indicate the orchestral instruments that played in the passage in the original version (see figure 8).

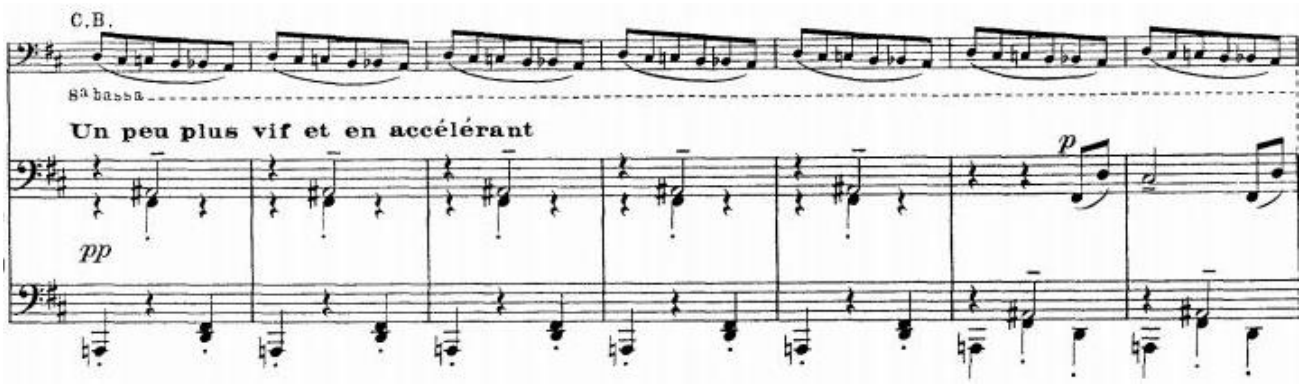


Figure 8: Ravel, *La valse*, mm. 579-585.

This passage utilizes monochromaticism through repetitive figures and the soft dynamic. By taking away pre-formed ideas based on colors, the viewer might focus on the form of the subject in a painting and be actively involved in distinguishing it from its background through shapes, angles, and slight gradations of colors. The muted color in figure 7 is the rumbling of a descending figure in the left hand, played by the contrabass in the original version. On the piano, this figure contributes to a muted timbre and rhythmic quality through the use of slurs in the lower register of the piano, rather than the staccati seen in the suggested left-hand part of the transcription. The second muted color is found in the right hand, which also plays in the lower register of the piano and places an emphasis is on the second beat. Six measures later, a clear melodic motif emerges above this monochromatic figure, an effect similar to a viewer suddenly recognizing a familiar feature in a cubist painting.

In addition to using monochromaticism, Ravel manipulates the narrative element of the waltz by abruptly switching thematic motifs. An example of dynamic and thematic switching can

be seen in measures 516 to 521 (see figure 9). A deviation of the Waltz H motif begins to crescendo from a *forte* into a *fortissimo* resolution, as it did in section A of the waltz, but it quickly transforms into a fragmented and transposed Waltz A.3 motif, at a *piano* dynamic level.

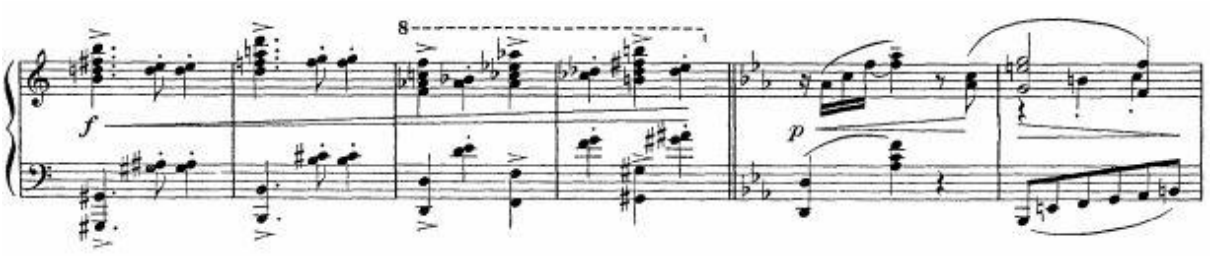


Figure 9: Ravel, *La valse*, mm. 516-521.

Color plays a significant role in *La valse* as it helps to distinguish between the different personalities and moods of the waltz sections. Some of the elements Ravel used to portray contrasting and chaotic moods and narratives are the use of the pedal, modes, dynamics, rhythmic energy, tempo, and texture. These musical elements are parallels to artistic devices found in synthetic cubism, in which works emphasize the combination, or synthesis, of shapes in the picture. Color assumes an important role in these works since shapes, while remaining fragmented and flat, are larger and more decorative.

Other musical elements Ravel used to portray fragmentation include different tempi for similar thematic material (compare measures 331 and 584), approaches to harmony sustenance (as in measure 484), abrupt changes of registral textures (as in measures 308 to 315), and capricious rhythmic energy (as in measures 410 to 413).

Pianist Alfredo Casella wrote that Ravel was recognized for his harmonic style and "aggregations his predecessors had scarcely dared to consider."[17] Ravel uses the technique of displaced slurred two-eighth notes profusely in *La valse*. In the passage shown in figure 10, the composer creates an ascending line with slurred and dissonant chords carrying displaced accents that give priority to the principal beat, but these accents also simultaneously create a hemiola. By using the two-note slurs, Ravel metrically changes the beat in the two measures shown and emphasizes chords that are distantly related to the current tonal center.

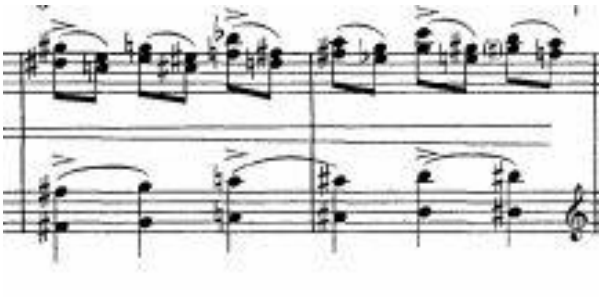


Figure 10: Ravel, *La valse*, mm. 401-402.

Other harmonic artifices used by Ravel are created through the ways he tried to sustain harmony which might elicit several pedal functions. In this example, Ravel wrote for a bass chord to ring underneath a fast-moving harmonic progression. Some approaches to execute this might be to use the *damper* pedal and have a saturation of harmonies build up to a blur of indistinguishable tones. The other alternative would call for the *sostenuto* pedal. This pedal sustains *only* the notes simultaneously depressed with the pedal, allowing just the selected notes to carry through a passage. As one foot holds down the *sostenuto* pedal, the other one uses the

[17] Alfred Casella, "Ravel's Harmony," *The Musical Times* 67, no. 1 (1926): 124-127.

damper pedal only to sustain the long chord, but also to blend all the chords (or notes) together, which results in a rich chordal ring of a seemingly dominant chord with chromatic additives on top (see figure 11).

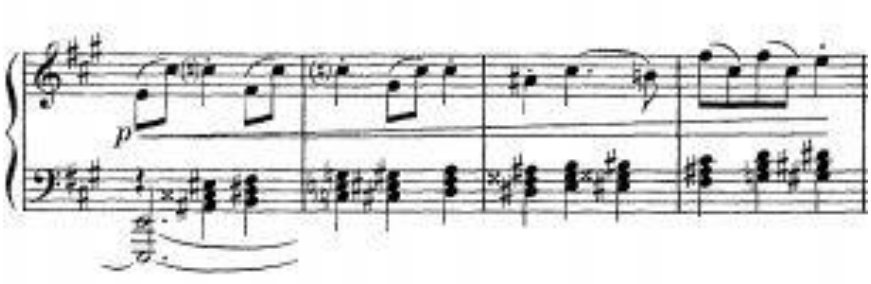


Figure 11: Ravel, *La valse*, mm. 704-707.

Tempo changes also help to fragment the narrative element of *La valse*. Measures 579 to 633 are a recapitulation of waltz I of section A (see figure 12). The beginning of waltz I starts off slow and heavy. However, in section B, the recurring waltz I begins with staccato markings on top of its tenuto-lined note indicating a less full-bodied tone as with a little bit of nervous energy when considering intention of the tempo marking. The staccato in the top line did not exist in the original waltz motif, and this signals a change in the texture of the motif. There is no tempo indication at the beginning of the recurring waltz motif, but Ravel writes *Un peu plus vif et en accélérant* [a little livelier and accelerating] at the top of the waltz. By increasing the original tempo, the personality of this version of the waltz contrasts with the way in which the original waltz narrative was introduced. The section keeps accelerating without stop until measure 644, colliding into the next waltz with a tempo indication of *Mouvement du début* [same tempo as at the beginning], signifying an abrupt change in character.

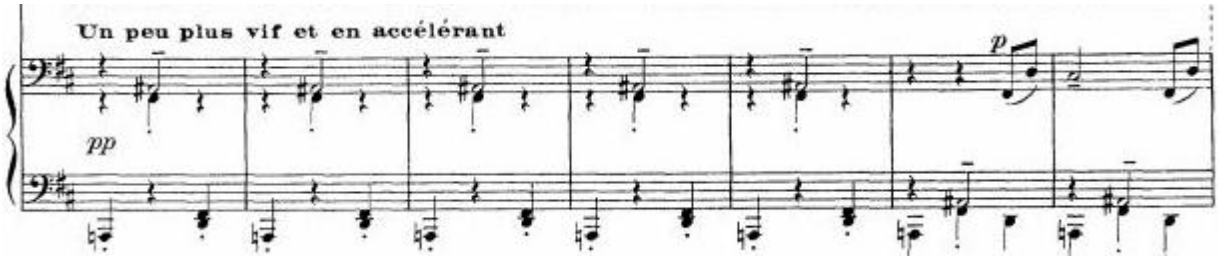


Figure 12: Ravel, *La valse*, mm. 579-585.

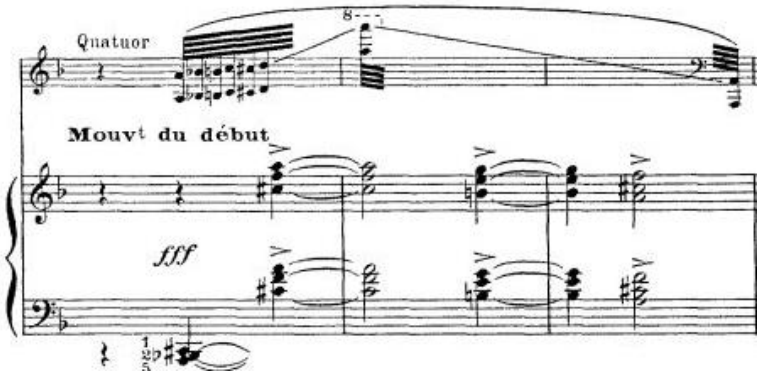


Figure 13: Ravel, *La valse*, mm. 645-647.

Collage

Synthetic cubist artists employed collage techniques by applying various materials to the canvas, creating new patterns and textures. To emphasize the subject, they did not limit themselves to paper materials to be pasted onto each other, but juxtaposed any kind of medium and material, or any sort of physical imagery. The different textures reflected the various moods and identities of the artist, expressed by the selected collage material. By pasting foreign material onto the painting or object, artists wanted to integrate fragments of art and real life—newspaper clippings, playing cards, or even advertisements. The collage method was intended to rebuild the modern man's mentality, to make him see that the world is unpredictable, and the properties of things are impermanent. Each element of the composition was extracted from its context and

included in an alien environment, thus gaining a whole new meaning.[18] It was this transformation of a material, violation of traditional ties, and the unusual role of the usual things that attracted artists.[19]

La valse is an intricate and complex piece that overlaps themes, shapes, and times. The circularity of the dance is gathered from the constant triple meter feel and even flow of waltz themes. But at times, Ravel disturbs the narrative element of the waltz by embedding fragments of different waltz sections into phrases, and juxtaposing musical material to portray different angles and views of the waltz. In measure 516, the recapitulation of Waltz H is introduced and five measures later, a fragment of Waltz A.3 (transposed) appears (see figure 14). Then, four measures later, a broken theme from Waltz G surfaces (see figure 15).

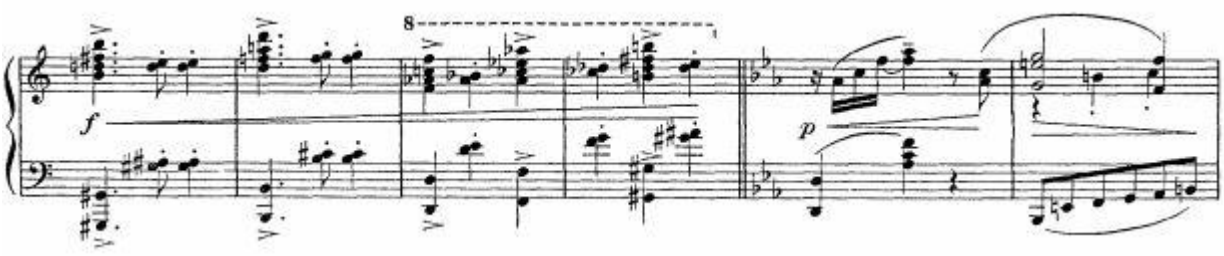


Figure 14: Ravel, *La valse*, mm. 516-521.

[18] In Braque's artwork *Fruitdish and Glass*, the artist used two different kinds of motifs on a dark beige background, with the two motifs being charcoal and cut-out wallpaper. His purpose in overlapping these mediums was to distort the reality and dimensions of the objects that he had drawn and attached to the painting.

[19] Pierre Dufour, a critic, wrote an article on Picasso's discovery of the "arbitrariness of forms" in Demoiselles d'Avignon and equated it to Swiss linguisit Ferdinand de Saussure's Course in General Linguisitics. Saussure's work emphasized that the value of language or the system of interdependent terms is dependent on the simultaneous presence of the others. The arbitrariness of any sign is limited by the fact that it belongs to a particular sign but also that it differs from all other signs in that language. For example: French has one word, "mouton" where the English has two, "sheep" and "mutton", one signifying the living animal, the other the meat derived from it. In comparing this to Picasso's Demoiselles, we see that Picasso uses the same graphic mark, a curve whose significance changes so that it can represent an arm in one part, a thigh somewhere else, and a breast in another place. Pepe Karmel, Picasso and The Invention of Cubism, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), 34; 101-105.

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Figure 15: Ravel, *La valse*, mm. 524-526.

In this example of collage, Ravel rearranges the placement of waltzes. Instead of following the order of the waltz themes that had been established in section A of *La valse*, he fragments the different motifs and places them in other, unfamiliar places. Furthermore, in this section, dynamics change suddenly as the original mood of each waltz fragment is preserved. While Ravel maintains the waltz feel with a distinct "um-pah-pah," this may seem lost and ambiguous because he also applies such a wide dynamic spectrum to very short thematic periods. Additionally, this integration of waltz motifs distorts the listener's aural understanding of what the waltz themes are, and of their personality.

However Ravel does not only manipulate the order or the placement of the waltzes. In figure 16, Ravel superimposes fragmented themes from Waltz A.3 in the right hand and Waltz G in the left hand. The original lilting A.3 Waltz consisted of a two-measure phrase that would resolve the tension of the accented second beat in the first measure by placing the expected emphasis on the first beat in the next measure. Figure 16 shows the first part of that phrase, with the emphasized second beat. Ravel repeats that rhythmic deviation building excitement and chaos while simultaneously allowing Waltz G in the left hand to proceed at a loud or forte level.

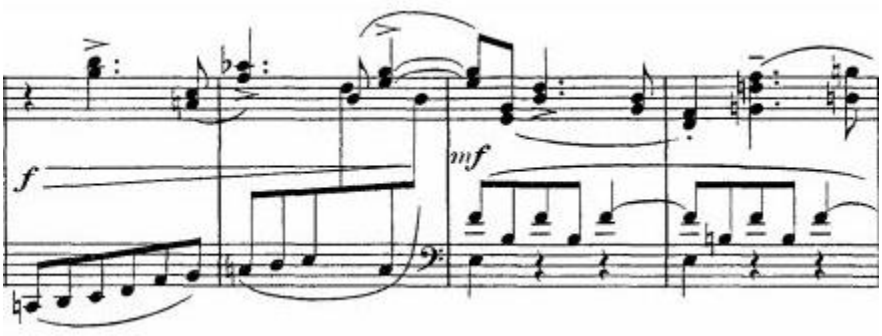

Figure 16: Ravel, *La valse*, mm. 704-707.

In the latter part of section B, Ravel introduces foreign rhythmic ideas that had not been written previously in any sections of *La valse*. The collage effect is obtained through the rhythmic infiltration of groupings of two eighth-note slurs into a three-beat pattern. In figure 17, the slurs do not begin on the first beat of the three-beat figure, but start on the second half of the first beat and the tension settles on the third beat of the three beat pattern. This offsets the metric feel and inserts a false sense of downbeat on the latter half of the first beat and on the third beat, instead of the usual first-beat emphasis.

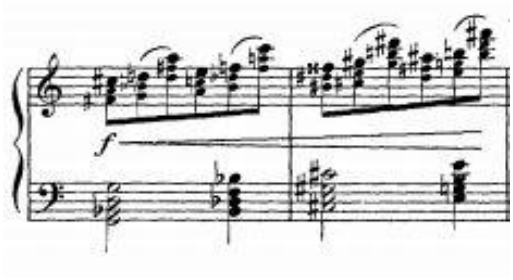

Figure 17: Ravel, *La valse*, mm. 672-673.

The element of musical collage disrupts the general waltz feel of the piece, changing its mood and atmosphere, thus emulating the state Picasso and Braque wanted to evoke when

people looked into their artwork: a state that required them to shed their traditional understanding of perspective and recognize the linguistic character of their pictorial expressions as their idea of realism.[20]

Conclusion

Through the examination of the three cubist devices of angularity, fragmentation, and collage, it becomes apparent that *La valse* can be understood as a canvas on which Ravel manipulates various characteristics of the waltz in the ways that Picasso and Braque employed color, space, and planes to produce vibrancy in their subjects. The waltz is organized in two sections, and the different faces and angles of *La valse* are introduced through the many different waltz themes in the first part. From the reprise of the initial waltz theme in measure 440, Ravel begins to change the waltz texture of *La valse* by allowing dissonant frenzy and nervous repetitions, as he manipulates the shape and character of the earlier waltz themes and alters them through startling dynamic fluctuations, rearrangement of fragmented thematic material, the introduction of ambiguous meters, and variations of tempo.

Most of the fragmented and reconstructed thematic material occurs in the second section of the waltz. One experiences a painting in a moment, perceiving everything that is there at once. However, music unfolds in time. This binary structure allows Ravel to present the material once so it is familiar and then to distort the waltzes through dramatic transformations. In shifting the emphasis from its original waltz characteristics, *La valse* appears to portray a type of chaos, with disruptive events warping the basic waltz rhythm, the different waltz motifs, and the emphasis on certain musical elements that overwhelm the waltz rhythm.

[20] David Cottington, *Cubism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 40.

However, by completely changing the rhythmic aspect of the waltz, the one defining characteristic of the genre, *La valse* does seem to have announced the death of an icon that represented the opulence and elegance of a culture that had thrived on them.[21] However, through consideration of the similarities between Ravel's compositional techniques and the techniques of cubist painting, I have come to believe that Ravel did not try to paint the waltz, but instead used it as a subject to outline social and artistic currents during his time. The pictorial language of Picasso's *Girl on the Mandolin* is analogous to the musical language of *La valse*. The form is easy to identify, like the waltzes in this composition however the characteristic fragmentation is also heard quite clearly from Ravel's manipulation of normal musical devices such as rhythm, themes, or dynamics. Picasso was not concerned about the reproduction of a woman holding a musical instrument, but more about the objective nature of his subject. In Ravel's case, his tribute to the waltz form was not about rectifying all the characteristics related to the waltz but more on portraying the realism of his physical and mental state through the objective nature of the waltz by transforming it through cubist methods.

[21] In the context of its postwar creation, it seems not at all farfetched to find in the closing pages of this score not only "the motif of death" cited by Arbie Orenstein in his discussion of this and Ravel's other postwar compositions (see *Ravel: Man and Musician,* p. 195) but also a reflection of a shattered world that reveled in the frivolity of dancing.

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